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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- USCIRF urges President Obama to raise concerns about religious freedom violations in Vietnam when he meets at the White House with Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang on July 25. Raising these concerns as the U.S.-Vietnamese bilateral relationship is improving will underscore America's support for this fundamental right.

"Because religious freedom conditions remain very poor in Vietnam, we respectfully urge President Obama to raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights when he meets with President Truong Tan Sang," said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. "The progress that took place over the past decade was achieved when American and international attention made improvements in religious freedom a core part of the bilateral agenda. These linkages did not, and will not, threaten our relationship: In fact, the Vietnamese government's support for religious freedom can only strengthen the relationship between our two countries."

As documented in USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report, the government of Vietnam continues to expand control over all religious activities, severely restrict independent religious practice, and repress individuals and religious groups it views as challenging its authority. The Vietnamese government uses a specialized religious police force and vague national security laws to suppress independent Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai activities, and seeks to stop the growth of ethnic minority Protestantism and Catholicism via discrimination, violence and forced renunciations of their faith. The government also continues to harass, threaten,

intimidate, detain, and sentence lawyers and disbar human rights defenders who have assisted religious communities or religious freedom advocates in cases against the state.

“Vietnam must do more to respect religious freedom. The state visit provides a unique opportunity for President Obama to press for change,” continued Dr. Swett. “Opening more space for independent religious activity and freeing jailed lawyers who defend the rights of individuals and communities is a must.”

In December 2012, lawyer and human rights defender Le Quoc Quan, who has assisted Catholics in seeking return of church properties, was again arrested. Mr. Quan currently is detained incommunicado in Hoa Lo Prison with no access to his lawyer and family. Dr. Cu Huy Ha Vu, who in 2010 represented the residents of the village of Con Dau against a government land grab of their village and cemetery, was charged with propaganda against the state. He now is serving a seven-year sentence based on other activism and is in poor health.

Given these systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations, USCIRF continues to recommend that Vietnam be designated as a “country of particular concern (CPC), placing it among the world’s worst violators of religious freedom. The Commission has recommended CPC status for Vietnam since 2001. The State Department did so in 2004 and 2005, but removed the designation in 2006 because of progress toward fulfilling a binding agreement.